

Pavel Aleksandrovič Florenskij Lectures on the Christian Worldview

The Florenskian text, here being subjected to our reactions and reflections, takes us back to Pavel Aleksandrovic Florenskij's lectures in the Summer and Autumn of 1921 at the Moscovite Theological Academy. There are two versions of these lectures, Florenskij's own brief notes, and a more complete transcription by his students. The text I was asked to react to is the latter. Florenskij's personal notes are only published in Russian, in volume three of the Complete Works.¹ The student's transcriptions have also been published in Italian and in English.²

The context is that of the great famine which lasted till 1922 and which left no less than five million victims.

This famine, as others in Russian history, was the result of the economic disruption sparked during World War I and amplified through four instabilities brought by, namely: the Russian Revolution; the Russian Civil War; the War Communism policy which started in 1918 and included the confiscation of religious property; the Bolshevik food apportionment policy which was made worse by inefficient rail systems that were unable to distribute food resourcefully.

The 1921-1922 drought, then, aggravated the state of affairs to a national famine calamity.

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¹ Pavel. A. Florenskij, *Sočinenija v četyrech tomach* [Collected Works in Four Volumes], ed. A. Trubačëv, M.S. Trubačëva and P.V. Forenskij (Moskva: Mysl', 1994-1999).

² Pavel Florenskij, *La concezione cristiana del mondo*, ed. Antonio Maccioni (Bologna: Pendragon, 2011); Pavel Florensky, *At the Crossroads of Science & Mysticism: On the Cultural-Historical Place and Premises of the Christian World-Understanding*, trans. and ed. Boris Jakim (Kettering: Semantron, 2014).

It is in this context that Florenskij delivered his *History of Philosophy Lectures*, striving to integrate the complexity of his arguments stemming from years of mathematical, philosophical and religious research. In fact, his lifetime project was to come up with a system which promoted a unified worldview.

In this apocalyptic socio-religious and political context, Florenskij comes forward as a teacher, a master, with all intent to secretly pass on wisdom to his interlocutors. Yes, secretly. These lectures were delivered in absolute secrecy and illegality as, in 1918, Lenin practically started decreeing the illegality of the Orthodox Church as an institution. Consequently the Academy had closed its doors and the lectures were delivered at the Donskoy Monastery.

At first glance, the text itself, made up of notes and scattered papers, appears to be composed of a cluster of disconnected ideas. However, upon taking the ascetical challenge of reading it more than once and to patiently ponder on its context, one arrives at grasping something of Florenskij's logic regarding his theory of a Christian worldview. What follows in this contribution, then, are the deciphered elements which characterize this worldview:

Reasonably Counter-Current

Considering the context, we are inclined to value these lectures, which came down to us through Florenskij's notes, firstly as an act of defiance, intolerance and resistance towards the atheist worldview which was imposing itself by communism upon a "people who is deeply theocratic at the core of its soul."³ He himself declares, "I have developed my own philosophical and scientific worldview, which ... contradicts the vulgar interpretation of communism."

Secondly we are inclined to think that Florenskij attempts at showing the reasonableness of religious faith and its worldview in the face of irrational hostility towards the religious phenomenon. Florenskij's understanding of hostility is that of "an erroneous methodological propensity." He seems to hint at this in Lectures I and III (respectively entitled *The Day and the Night of History* and *The Signs of the Epoch*). Then, in *A Note on Orthodoxy*, he argues that:

The existent hostility is that of a methodological type. It is not determined by the content of religion, or by that of the religious confession under scrutiny, but it is determined by the method of knowledge. The knowledge proper to the culture of Modernity is that which emerges through negation: *omnis determinatio est negatio*. Modernity does not acquire knowledge through the sympathetic con-penetration in reality, but through the affirmation of the I which is hostile to

³ Vladimir Solov'ev, *Il destino della teocrazia* (Milano: Udine, 2014), 41.

reality. This affirmation is at loggerheads with an obstacle, namely the reality which the I fails to penetrate (grasp).⁴

So, what Florensky is proposing in his Christian Worldview is not so much the formal aspect of religion, in particular Christianity, but a re-evaluation of the dialectical relationship between the subject and object of spiritual knowledge.⁵

In the Midst of the Scientific and the Intuitive

To explore what Florenskij has to say on the *Christian Worldview* it is imperative to get a glimpse of Florenskij's own worldview. As a Platonist and Physicist he holds on to the existence of "two worlds," or spheres of existence: terrestrial and spiritual, the visible and the invisible. The former falls within the grasp of rational faculties and the senses, while the latter aspires to infinity transcending the senses and the rational faculties. Nonetheless, the invisible/spiritual world leaves tangible signs of its presence. As rational, sensible and spiritual creatures we have to dwell in the intermediary state between two worlds, in a sort of frontier, which sometimes he refers to it as *dream*. No wonder *Iconostasis*,⁶ Florenskij's last theological work written in 1922, opens with a chapter on *The Spiritual Structure of Dreams*, insisting that these are our first access into the realm of the invisible. Paradoxically a dream's finale (*denouement*) wakes us to the realm of the visible. It is here, in this frontier or passage way, where Truth is encountered. This passage way is a meeting point between our search for Truth and Truth's self-revelation. In the impact fragments of Truth are grasped as we patiently search for meaning by integrating fragments and contradictions. In itself this is an ascetical exercise into which Florenskij employs the key of mathematics to open ajar the meaning of existence.⁷ In Lecture XI of his *The Christian Worldview*, he states that "we are oriented towards reality and towards its meaning" as 'meaning sustains reality.'

⁴ Pavel Florenskij, "Nota sull'ortodossia," in *Bellezza e liturgia. Scritti su cristianesimo e cultura*, trad. Claudia Zonghetti (Milano: Mondadori, 2010), 41.

⁵ See: Marina Guerrisi, "Pavel Florenskij e la tolleranza infelice," in *Metabasis.it, Filosofia e Comunicazione: Rivista Internazionale di Filosofia online* X/20 (Novembre 2015): 57-76.

⁶ Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, trans. Donald Sheehan and Olga Andrejev (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996).

⁷ Vladislav Shaposhnikov, "Mathematics as the Key to a Holistic World View: The Case of Pavel Florensky?" *Lateranum* 83, no. 3 (2017): Pavel A. Florenskij – "Ho contemplato il mondo come un insieme." *Teologia, filosofia e scienza di fronte alla complessità del reale*, 535-562. The author has other studies which explore the hypothesis of the ritual genesis of arithmetic and geometry, the religious background of the emergence of zero, the role of Name-worshipping.

This is Florenskij's initial viewpoint from which he contemplates and explores reality in all of its complexity. In the same lecture, on *Instruments, notions and things sacred*, his method is presented: "The scope of the study of the particular areas is primarily to observe the results of various disciplines, to fix distinct theses and deduce distinct conclusions; secondly to show the mutation of the world's spiritual life," and in his view (experientially passing from a scientific worldview to a Christian one) shows that the mutation does not reject the former, neither endorses it, but (we must say) is a natural development of it as much as it is a leap into it!

One might conclude here that Florenskij's worldview is religious and particularly Christian, inasmuch as firstly it is mathematical. For Florenskij, Mathematics is complex, Religion is complex, Christ himself is complex. But then again, it is precisely because of complexity that all lead to simplicity.⁸

Florenskij did not pursue mathematics as a discipline for its own sake, but for the light it could bring to the philosophical and theological aspects of the concept of Infinity. His mathematical worldview enabled him to integrate the principles of continuity (i.e. "nature never makes leaps,") and discontinuity (i.e. leaps are necessary). Already as a student he dwelt on concepts of continuity and discontinuity in writing his dissertation *The Idea of Discontinuity as an Element of the Worldview* for which he was awarded his baccalaureate in 1904. Florenskij's interest in mathematics was largely theological. He sought to establish an analogy between mathematics and theology. It is not the place here to discuss this analogy; what is of interest for us is that the elements for a Christian worldview, presented in his lectures, represent his leap from science to theology.

A Liberating Leap from Imposed Constraints

The Christian worldview is in itself linear starting from creation (beginning), moving towards eschatological fulfilment (end) through a process of redemption (battling against chaos and fragmentation). With this at the backdrop, Florenskij can spell out in his lectures an understanding of the Resurrection (and consequently, of eschatological fulfilment) as a leap, a movement of transcendence. In Lecture I of *The Christian Worldview*, he specifies that "Christianity is not about eternity and eternal life, but about the resurrection from the dead," ultimately it is about a leap enabled by the hiddenness within the present of past and future. Creation itself is a leap, as it originates from God, and is in God, Maker of heaven and earth of all that is seen and unseen. Continuity

⁸ Florenskij, *La concezione cristiana del mondo*, XII, 135-137.

is therefore the result of discontinuity. In *The Pythagorean Numbers* he writes: “Where there is discontinuity, we search for wholeness; but where there is wholeness, form is acting and, consequently, there is an individual limitation of reality from the environment.”⁹

Employing this paradoxical principle in a theological context saves us from determinism and any pharisaic self-referential way of living and acting. For example, in Lecture XVI *Oriented towards Christ*, he delves into the diatribes between Christ and the Pharisees but not with sinners. Pharisees are the epitome of a self-referential existence, observing laws by appropriating them and in doing so detaching them from their source: God. In this context one understands Florenskij’s criticism, especially in Lecture X, of the Renaissance worldview to which we owe a religion based on moral behaviour (hence individualistic - Protestant) as opposed to the Medieval worldview (to which we owe a religion based on the symbolic, therefore ecclesial - Orthodox).

Florenskij argues that a sinner can still be part of the Church, as the Church — or rather ecclesiality — is the space where contradictions are integrated in unity. In Lecture I he writes: ‘inner contradiction is not a sign of falsehood but of inner integrity.’ For Florenskij, Truth resides in contradiction and all Christian tenets of the faith point to this, starting from belief in the Tri-Unity of God and the Divine-human oneness in Jesus Christ. A Christian worldview is consequently, by force, ecclesial and therefore organic but not necessarily systematic; it embraces contradiction. This seems to be the underlying line of thought in Lectures IV, V and VI.

Organically One

Organic unity is therefore another characteristic of a Christian Worldview. It has been acknowledged that Florensky’s contribution “was formulated in the general context of the Russian idea of ‘integral knowledge.’”¹⁰ He is not interested at all in finding “scientific evidence that *backs* faith; rather, he strives for using all means possible to construct a *unified* world, where science and theology, phenomena and noumena, exist *in concord*.”¹¹ It is this organic unity

⁹ Pavel Florenskij, “*Pifagorovy čisla*,” *Sočinenija*, 2: 634; See also, Vladimir Sergeyvich Soloviev, *The Justification of the Good: An Essay on Moral Philosophy*, trans. Nathalie A. Duddington (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2010), 259-260.

¹⁰ Sergei Barano, *An Examination of the Attitude of Pavel Florensky Towards the Interaction of Science and Theology* (Cambridge: The Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, (on-line) <http://cam-uk.academia.edu/SergeiBaranov>, 2017, 1. Accessed July 4, 2018.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

which enables us to contemplate Truth. Florensky defines Truth “as a living wholeness” emerging through “direct rational attention on the actual objects of the external world.”¹² As with the neo-Idealists, Florensky “strove to overcome Kant’s phenomenalism by attempting to link the knowing subject and the world in organic unity.” Critical of Western positivism and rationalism, Florensky also followed Solovyov’s intuitivist theory of knowledge.¹³

In Florensky’s thought, organic unity is possible in and through ecclesiality based on love or friendship. “Because love means that an entity passes from the isolated separateness of A into the other, non-A, establishes its consubstantiality with it and consequently finds itself, i.e., A, in it.” In Lectures VIII and IX *Occultism and Sensibility*, and *The Human Body and the World*, Florensky discusses the possibility of finding oneself in the organism of another, both in human relationships and in the relational encounter with that which is hidden (occult) and also with creation.¹⁴ Positively this unity is characterized by harmony as there are various strata or levels of reality and “every phenomenon reflects in itself all other phenomena.”¹⁵ Therefore this unity is both living and vital. It is realized firstly in the Tri-Unity of God, wherein the Three Divine Persons pour themselves and receive each other in loving unity. In history this is actualized in and through the Church recognized by Florensky, and before him by Solovyov and Bulgakov, to be a manifestation of Holy Wisdom (*Sophia*), created but eternally destined to deepest union with God. In *The Pillar and Ground of Truth*, quoted and referred to also in the Lectures on *The Christian Worldview*, Florensky tries to present a complete Christian worldview (system of the world) around and ecclesiology dominated by the wisdom theme.¹⁶ Divine Wisdom permeates and penetrates everything and it is the principle of unity. For this reason Florensky can state that “there is no phenomenon which does not have a clear ecclesial aspect. All phenomena, positively or negatively, are oriented

¹² Chris Matthew Sciabarra, *Any Rand: The Russian Radical* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013), 44.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ He delves critically into mystical and esoteric phenomena but the underlying point is that of becoming one with the other.

¹⁵ Lecture IX, *At the Crossroads of Science & Mysticism*, 73; *La Concezione cristiana del mondo*, 114. He gives the example of a photograph which symbolically (not positivistically) is a manifestation of a body and the body is manifestation of the soul, 115.

¹⁶ Pavel Florensky “Sophia,” in *The Pillar and Ground of Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997/2004), 231-283; Louis Bouyer, *The Church of God: Body of Christ and Temple of the Spirit* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 140-141.

towards ecclesiality.”¹⁷ This constitutes “the sacral principle” (myth) which gives rise to cult and culture. Culture emerges from a cult, and cult rises from a myth. In the Christian context we express this in Liturgy, which binds the Church and opens up a window on the spiritual world, and permeates the life cycles of the believers and the cultural ramifications which express it and celebrate it. The same applies to icons, which are, strictly speaking, liturgical windows to heavenly realities, and relics of saints (especially the incorrupt bodies) which are a sign of the permeation of the divine life in death.¹⁸ In fact in Lectures XIX and XX, he discusses *The Question of the Symbol and of the Icon*, as well as *The Reverse Perspective and Illusionism*.

Conclusion

In this respect Florensky’s statements are understandable and prophetic, considering the rise of the communist regime from 1918, which tried to systematically eradicate Christian culture from Russian culture, not only by confiscating Church property, desecrating the sanctuaries, and prohibiting liturgical and cultic expressions, but also by going as far as to unearth the incorrupt bodies of the saints, displaying them in museums together with the mummified bodies of rodents. This “calculated blow by anti-religious propaganda,” intent at replacing the Christian worldview with another, was then reinforced with the state mimicking the Christian cult and culture through “mass blasphemous processions,” the publication of new state icons, and later the preservation of cadavers of the new “saints” of the state enshrined in state mausolea (like Lenin’s corpse in the Red Square).

This new worldview, however, was systematically imposed on a people and it is the total opposite of the Christian system.

Like the art form which represents it, the “spectre of the world revolution” replaces “the love of Christ” by “hatred and, instead of peace, ignited class enmity” and “divided the people into hostile camps and driven them to fratricide of unprecedented cruelty.”¹⁹ It

¹⁷ Florenskij, *La Concezione cristiana del mondo*, XI, 129.

¹⁸ See also Pavel Florensky, *Philosophy of Cult*, in Italian as *La Filosofia del Culto: Saggio di Antropodicea Ortodossa*, ed. Natalino Valentini (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2016); Florensky, *Pillar and Ground of Truth*.

¹⁹ Патриарха Тихона, ‘Послание Совету народных комиссаров’ (25 октября /7 ноября 1918 года): Покров 1.11.2017 (on-line) <http://pokrov.pro/author/red/>. Accessed June 30, 2018.

pretends to create only the appearance of reality and not a window on it, becoming also a deceptive instrument to the immobile spectator ... the man of the XIXth century made of himself the absolute measuring tape of truth and beauty. He forces the entire universe to rotate around himself.²⁰

Faced by the illusionism of such a culture, still persisting in our age, Florensky proposes the experience of a living and vital Christian system as ‘a new way of perceiving the world’²¹ in ourselves “destroying hardness of heart”²² to come together in community, in an “authentic school”²³ of life. This is “the immense responsibility”²⁴ Florensky shoulders us with in his *Lectures on the Christian Worldview*, his testament before being himself used, tried, persecuted, and eliminated for embodying this same worldview in himself.

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²⁰ Florenskij, *La Concezione cristiana del mondo*, 208.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 209.